

Province Begins Process of Reconciliation with Acknowledgment of Sinfulness

More than 130 members of the Jesuits USA Central and Southern Province gathered in St. Louis for Province Day, an annual event preceding the province's celebration of ordinations. They were there to learn more about the province's history of slaveholding and to consider what reconciliation might entail in light of this past.

Just over three years ago, Fr. Provincial Ronald Mercier met with Saint Louis University President Fred Pestello, archivists, staff and faculty and resolved to learn more about the history of Jesuit slaveholding. Today, it seems impossible to imagine Jesuits participating in this grave evil. The truth remains, however: Jesuits in the United States used forced labor to help their works survive, including the missions in Missouri and southern Louisiana.

The fact of Jesuit slaveholding is not news; historians have long known and written about it. However, scant attention has been paid to the enslaved people. Now, their lives – their names, their living conditions and their families – are the focus of the Slavery, History, Memory and Reconciliation Project.

As its name suggests, this project is about more than the research, though the research is vitally important. The project has three primary goals:

1. Research the history of Jesuit slaveholding in what is now the USA Central and Southern Province, with a particular focus on learning the identities and experience of the people who were held in slavery. Researchers are also tracing the family lineages of the enslaved people, in the hopes of identifying descendants and connecting them with their family history.
2. Share what is learned.
3. In dialogue with descendants and African-American communities, respond in an appropriate way, with an emphasis on healing and reconciliation.

The study began nearly two years ago. David Miros, Ph.D., director of the Jesuit Archives & Research Center,

and Jonathan Smith, Ph.D., vice president for diversity and community engagement at Saint Louis University, serve as co-directors of the project. Kelly Schmidt, a Ph.D. candidate at Loyola University Chicago, is lead researcher.

In May, Fr. Mercier released the information that has been learned so far. The Province Day gathering provided Jesuits the opportunity to delve more deeply into the material.

“As Jesuits, we know now that our history, while graced, is tragically sinful,” Fr. Mercier said. “While we must acknowledge this truth, we remember how the past is not history. It’s not even past. It continues in the form of racism today.”

Father Mercier encouraged the members of the province to consider the Slavery, History, Memory and Reconciliation Project as “Holy Saturday” in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. “Guilt, shame and blame can trap us in the past,” he said. “But like on Holy Saturday, we remain in God, who can open us to something new, who can offer a path to reconciliation.”



Eric Clark



Rita Montgomery Hollie



Danielle Harrison

Three African-American Jesuit collaborators joined the Jesuits for the Province Day conversation on slavery and reconciliation. They spoke after Miros and Schmidt presented the findings of the research so far.

Eric Clark, Ed.D., is president of Loyola Academy of St. Louis and an alumnus and former assistant principal of St. Louis University High School. Danielle Harrison, J.D., served as the provincial assistant for social ministries

and lay collaboration for the former Missouri Province. She was a founding member of the Loyola Institute for Spirituality, and later taught theology at St. Louis University High School. Rita Montgomery Hollie, J.D., is a long-time member of St. Matthew's Parish, the Jesuit parish in the Ville Neighborhood of St. Louis. An attorney, she also coordinated the Bridges Program – which sponsors Ignatian retreats – at the St. Charles Lwanga Center in St. Louis.

Harrison began the panel discussion by singing *There is a Balm in Gilead* – which served as a balm in its own right. “We are at a time, as descendants of enslaved and as descendants of those who enslaved, when we need a balm from God to heal our sin-sick souls,” she said. When she learned that the Jesuits who foster the spirituality that guides her life had owned slaves, she had to “stop and take a breath. It is very hard.”

Hollie agreed. “I felt blindsided,” she said. “I thought the Jesuits could solve the problems of the world. Then to learn they were part of the problem? I was angry, appalled.” Having some time to come to grips with the history, Hollie now says, “It’s messy. It’s necessary to get this information, but it is very, very difficult. I applaud the Jesuits’ courage in beginning this, but we have to get in the muck together to figure out how to heal.”

Clark enumerated the many ways the vestiges of slavery continue to this day in the form of racism and inequality. “The Jim Crow laws did not become illegal until the 1950s and ’60s. That’s not so long ago,” he noted. “People who grew up with this kind of racism are still affected by it. What does reconciliation look like? I don’t know. It won’t happen quickly. It’s necessary to admit wrongdoing and begin conversations.”

The research will continue. The next step is to connect with descendant communities to share the information, invite conversation and find ways to heal the deep wounds of slavery.

Father Joseph Brown, SJ, a professor in the Department of Africana Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, believes it is past time for this research and the conversations about reconciliation. “We are in the midst of a retrenchment in our country,”



Peter Queen was the first child born to an enslaved couple in the Missouri Mission. He continued to live at St. Stanislaus Seminary even after he was emancipated, until his death around 1907.

*History, despite its
wrenching pain,
Cannot be un-lived,
and if faced with courage,
Need not be lived again.*

~Maya Angelou

he said. “We are back to the ugly days of (overt) racism. But even in those days, there were people who stepped up to bring light. That’s what the Jesuits are doing through this project.”

He continued, “Just as the sacrament of reconciliation begins with the humble acknowledgment of our sinfulness, it is only by telling these stories with humility and openness that we begin the process of reconciliation.”

Father Brown and the panelists agree that it is right for Jesuits to take the lead in finding truth and working for reconciliation because, as Fr. Brown says, the “whole notion is very Ignatian, maintaining an openness to see what the Holy Spirit prompts.”

Harrison noted that Ignatian Spirituality fits well with African-American spirituality. Both recognize that God is for all people, in all places. “Who would be better at embracing this history and bringing healing (than the Jesuits)?” she asked.

Harrison encouraged the Jesuits of this province to “Listen, just listen. Listen to their (the descendants’) pain.”

“The call to reconciliation comes directly out of the Society’s 36th General Congregation,” Fr. Mercier said. “Also, the Church in the United States is asking religious communities to promote racial reconciliation. This is difficult work, but it is what we are called to do.”

Visit JesuitsCentralSouthern.org/HistoryResearch to read more about what has been learned through this research and to meet one enslaved woman whose strength and persistence have impressed researchers more than 150 years later.

To find out how you can contribute to this knowledge base or trace your ancestors, email HistoryResearch@Jesuits.org or call 314-376-2440.